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Gorbachev's Authoritarian Turn

Gorbachev has introduced major changes in the Soviet political process and taken policy steps since the beginning of the year that, accelerating the end of the Communist Party's monopoly of power, nevertheless constitute a significant shift toward authoritarianism. These steps include:

- Creation of a Presidency that, while filling the need for effective executive authority and sharply curtailing the power of the party Politburo, vests Gorbachev with powers that are subject to only modest and uncertain limitations.

- Presentation of Draft communist party Rules that offer limited democratization but are also designed to weaken Gorbachev's enemies in the party, reduce his accountability to a collegial leadership, and create a political base from which he can seek to preserve CPSU primacy in the emerging multi-party environment.

- Authorization of an attempt to oust leaders of the democratic wing within the party while retaining their potential followers, in order to prevent competition within the party from taking organized form.

- Adoption of a harsh policy toward non-Russian secessionism.

- Display of some deference toward the political Right and hostile treatment of the independent democratic opposition, including slanted treatment in the media.

- Strengthening law enforcement and repressive capabilities of the regime.

Gorbachev's turn toward authoritarianism is, in part, a response to the vitriolic criticism he has been receiving from the Right. Some members of the military, security and party Establishment do accuse him of betraying the interests of communism and the Soviet state. But his behavior is not simply dictated by fear of the military or anticipation of an imminent right-wing coup. He continues to enjoy substantial discretionary power, as long as major disorders or a sharp decline in his public standing do not increase his vulnerability to attack.

Gorbachev's own inclinations and concerns about the potential for convulsive upheaval in Soviet society are probably the primary factor in his turn toward authoritarianism. The key developments are:

- The increasing momentum behind what is, in effect, a slow-burning anti-communist revolution.

- The threat of rapid dissolution of the Soviet multinational state.

- o The prospect of a major new outbreak of instability arising from frustrated consumer grievances.

- o The likelihood of even more violent public reaction to an unavoidable radicalization of economic reform.

Gorbachev's authoritarian shift is likely to produce tactical gains at best in Soviet efforts to deal with the major problems that confront the USSR. It is unlikely to enhance long-term popular support for the Soviet system; it will probably not arrest the declining capability of Moscow to govern the country; it will not make introduction of economic reform that much easier; it could radicalize rather than pacify an unruly public; it is likely to intensify ethnic conflict; and it may increase Gorbachev's own vulnerability rather than enhance his staying power.

There is no question that the USSR needs consistent and decisive leadership as it tries to change its governing system and copes with numerous crises. Indeed, the newly elected Moscow City Council is showing how a democratically run body can develop and garner support for change.

The fundamental defect of Gorbachev's drift toward authoritarianism is that it is retarding creation of the infrastructure of democracy, impeding the emerging democratic forces in Soviet politics, and delaying establishment of effective parliamentary rule and responsible cabinet government. By so doing, it reduces the possibility for peaceful management of the explosive tensions latent in Soviet society. In other words, the effect of his moves may be precisely contrary to that intended by Gorbachev.

It is possible that Gorbachev's authoritarian shift is seen by him as a tactical move designed to gain time before proceeding to further liberalization. His intentions and capabilities should become much clearer through the stance he adopts toward democratic forces at the critical forthcoming party congress in July. If his moves are simply tactical their faulty rationale, nevertheless, need not be accepted: the longer an authoritarian posture is held, the worse the consequences are likely to be. For the US, the potential costs of impaired democratization in the USSR could be heavy: an increase in the risk of a return to dictatorship accompanied by a more hostile or at least a less predictable foreign policy, and greater likelihood of an internationally destabilizing vortex of violence and civil war.

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